How "blended" should "blended learning" be?

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Abstract. Concerns about progression rates of international students enrolled in an academic English course to prepare them for university studies led to the addition of an online teaching component, including both synchronous and asynchronous elements. Due to what appeared to be inconsistent student engagement with the online element, this study was initiated to investigate students' approaches to the new aspects of the course. Students were asked to rank the principal elements of the course according to their importance using diamond ranking, a critical thinking tool, and to make comments to explain their reasons for the rankings produced. What seems to emerge quite clearly from the initial data is (1) the need for closer coordination between the teachers who deliver the online course elements and students who are expected to engage in Blended Learning (BL), and (2) for them to have a clearer understanding of both the potential and the limitations of blended learning and teaching.

Keywords: blended learning, English for academic purposes, students' views, diamond ranking.

1.   Introduction

The use of web-based materials and computer-mediated communication as part of classroom-based courses is so widespread now that almost any language course that is not delivered entirely online will include such an element alongside the face-to-face (f2f) classroom teaching, and could therefore be described as adopting a 'blended learning' approach. BL is adopted and implemented in models of teaching which reside somewhere on the continuum between traditional classroom delivery involving f2f interaction and completely online courses with no classroom f2f tuition. Where there is no reduction in f2f teaching time, the term 'technology

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enhanced learning' has been applied (Graham, Woodfield, & Harrison, 2013). The range of possibilities afforded by the use of technology potentially presents the teacher and course designer not only with opportunities, but also with additional responsibilities.
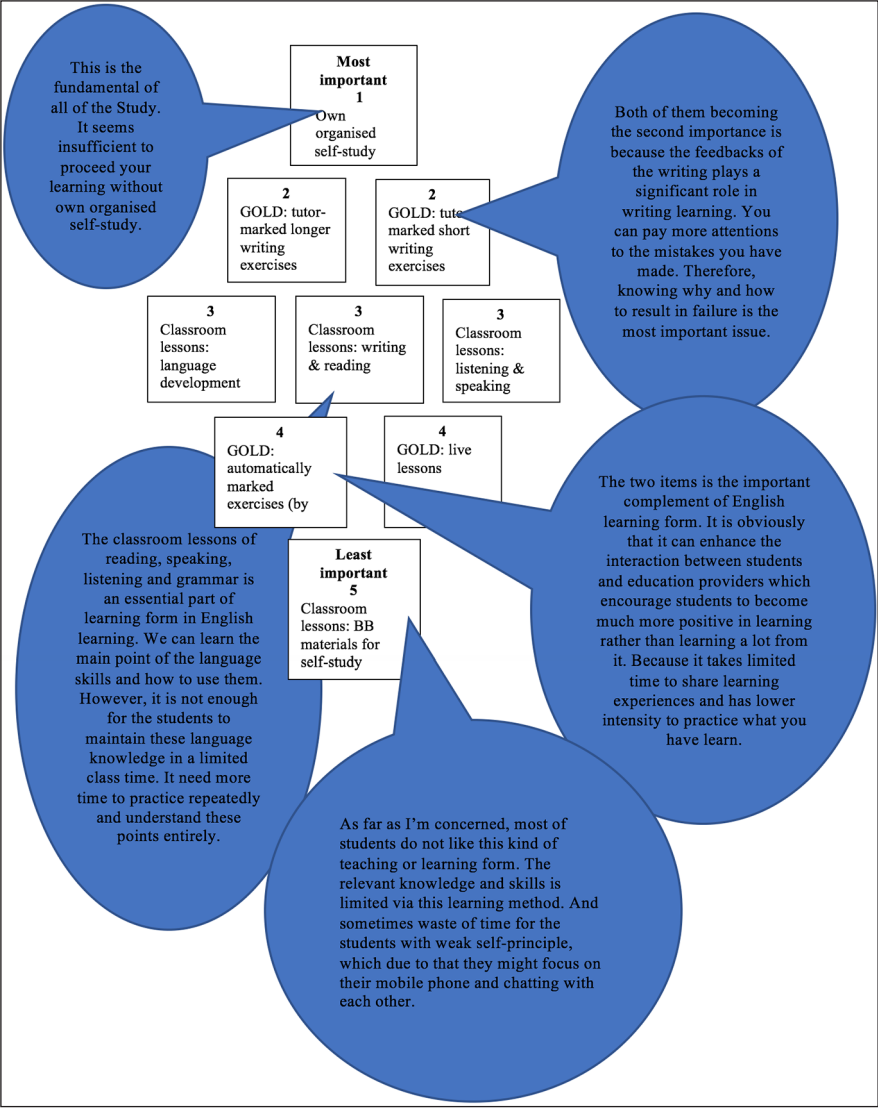
This presentation is concerned with the evaluation of a BL course where the classroom and online elements were designed separately, and in which the f2f and online teaching were mostly carried out by different teachers, that is, most of the teachers were responsible for either the online or the f2f teaching, but not both. This has raised questions about the relative effectiveness of the two elements of the course, the way in which the two elements are coordinated, and whether the nature of the coordination is linked to the effectiveness of each element and to the overall course.

2. Method and context

A cohort of 86 international students, divided into five groups, enrolled in an English language programme to prepare them for university undergraduate (UG) or postgraduate (PG) studies, were asked to give their views on the different elements of a BL course. The principal investigator had direct access to four of the five groups (74 students), spread across three proficiency levels, via classes held to deliver one of the elements of the BL course, meeting each of the groups on three occasions each week for 10 weeks. One of the data collection tools (diamond ranking), selected to provide both quantitative and qualitative data, was tested on all four groups, and the initial results are presented.

Diamond ranking is a critical thinking skills tool (Clark, 2009) which has been used in a variety of contexts, including in higher education, where its potential use across the curriculum has been investigated (Ostrowski, 2013). Interactive diamond ranking grids were emailed to students asking them to rank nine options, each representing one element of the BL course. The grid allows students to 'drag & drop' each option into a position indicating its relative importance, or value, to them personally as a constituent part of the programme (Figure 1). The five-tier grid permits nine options to be ranked: the top-most position (1) represents the most important choice, the bottom-most position (5) represents the least important choice, and three intermediate levels (2, 3, and 4), allowing co-ranking of options, indicate decreasing levels of importance. The students' choice of ranking for each option on the grid is justified with their own explanations by writing in 'drag & drop' comment balloons.

Figure 1.   Level 6 (IELTS 5.0 – 5.5) students' diamond ranking and comments

This is the fundamental of all of the Study. It seems insufficient to proceed your learning without own organised self-study.

Most important
1
Own organised self-study

2
GOLD: tutor-marked longer writing exercises

2
GOLD: tutor-marked short writing exercises

Both of them becoming the second importance is because the feedbacks of the writing plays a significant role in writing learning. You can pay more attentions to the mistakes you have made. Therefore, knowing why and how to result in failure is the most important issue.

3
Classroom lessons: language development

3
Classroom lessons: writing & reading

3
Classroom lessons: listening & speaking

4
GOLD: automatically marked exercises (by

4
GOLD: live lessons

The two items is the important complement of English learning form. It is obviously that it can enhance the interaction between students and education providers which encourage students to become much more positive in learning rather than learning a lot from it. Because it takes limited time to share learning experiences and has lower intensity to practice what you have learn.

The classroom lessons of reading, speaking, listening and grammar is an essential part of learning form in English learning. We can learn the main point of the language skills and how to use them. However, it is not enough for the students to maintain these language knowledge in a limited class time. It need more time to practice repeatedly and understand these points entirely.

Least important
5
Classroom lessons: BB materials for self-study

As far as I'm concerned, most of students do not like this kind of teaching or learning form. The relevant knowledge and skills is limited via this learning method. And sometimes waste of time for the students with weak self-principle, which due to that they might focus on their mobile phone and chatting with each other.

3.   Discussion

These initial results are from a single iteration of the course only, and were obtained from students using diamond ranking activities. The preliminary results suggest

that elements of the course which were taught in the classroom were viewed with greater positivity across four different levels of English language ability (Figure 2) than were several different components of the online course. Most respondents, across all groups, placed the classroom-taught elements of the BL course in the upper tiers of the diamond ranking grid, whilst the online components of the course tended to occupy the lower (less valued) tiers of the grid. Comments made to justify the rankings (Figure 3) further indicate that students' perceptions of the latter are received with lower positivity than the f2f elements.

Since this data was collected, however, the online course has been re-designed, and two further iterations to provide further data are planned. One of the principal significant changes made is that classroom teachers now deliver the online element of the BL course, and are free to decide how tasks in the four main skills areas (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are released to the classes which they teach, hence increasing the possibility of integrating the online and classroom elements of the BL course.

Figure 2. Diamond ranking frequency distribution of blended learning course elements for all four groups

Key: C_RW = classroom reading and writing, C_LS = classroom listening & speaking, C_LD = classroom language development, C_BB = classroom Blackboard materials, OWN_SS = own self-study, GOLD_LL = live lessons, GOLD_LW = longer tutor-marked writing, GOLD_SW = shorter tutor-marked writing, GOLD_AM = automatically marked tasks.
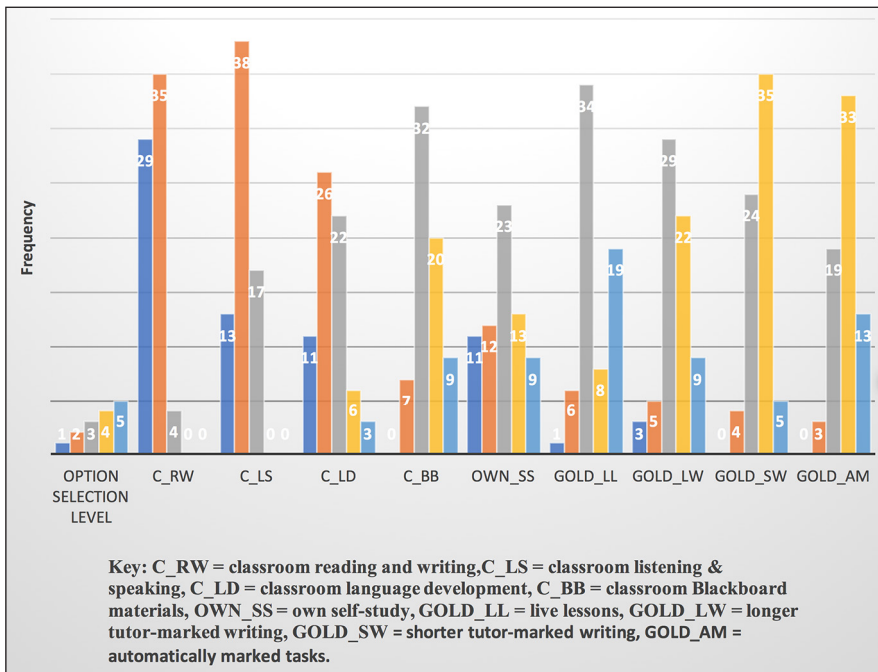
Figure 3. Comments indicating positive or negative attitudes towards specific course components: GOLD live lessons, Level 4 group (IELTS ~4.0). Numbers in brackets equate to position on diamond ranking grid

Positive	Negative
Having to say that this is original way to	This way of learning I will give up halfway (5)
This is the basis of all courses (1)	Internet and classmates do some distraction (3) — I think it is not interesting (4)
This is very convenient for students to learn knowledge. Students can hear the teacher's instructions when they are not in the classroom (3)	There are a lot of students. Can not answer all inquiries. The weakness of the net makes a boring lesson. I think it's a waste of time.

4.   Conclusions

There is clearly a need to consider which aspects of a course are best conducted online and which in the classroom. It may be that there are certain types of activity which are better suited to online presentation, without a teacher, such as those which the computer can both deliver and provide feedback on. However, the results shown here raise questions about that, as automatically marked activities were deemed to be the least important to most students. It may be that rather than the nature of the activities, or even the content, it could be the overlap between the classroom and online tasks, or the manner in which the tasks are blended, which determines their perceived value. That is, simply making online materials available is insufficient for meaningful engagement in a blended learning course, whereas

reasoned integration of the two elements may fulfil students' potential abilities for greater independence in their studies.

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